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HOTEL EMPLOYEES AND LABOR UNIONS



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Hotel Employees and Labor Unions

By AUGUST STENDER

28 April 1920 SWS
"Should hotel employees join labor unions?" is an all-important question. The labor union movement among the hotel employees has, up to the present, been only sporadic. The West has yielded more than the East. Practically every city has at one time or another witnessed futile attempts at organizing the hotel employees. The first serious attempt to revolutionize existing conditions through strikes took place in Chicago in 1903. It was the natural result of the then all-powerful and mischievous machinations of a handful of unscrupulous organizers and walking delegates who have, from 1900 up to this time, disastrously interfered with all industries located in Chicago. It was therefore only natural that the hotel employees should follow suit. Since then, at one time or another, the effort to organize the hotel employees has been renewed until, in 1912, New York became its prey. The outcome is still fresh in the memories of all concerned. The fire, although subdued, is still smoldering under the surface. Of late, renewed attempts are being made; mass meetings have again been held, and although a general strike has been pooh-poohed, the less resistant restaurant keepers in poorer sections of New York City have been subjected to all the intimidating arts of the professional labor union organizer. Propaganda is persistently carried on; the negligible gains so far made may at any time inflame the minds of other sections, spread broadcast, as it were; and the sorrowful spectacles of 1903 and 1912, with their disastrous results, are threatening a repetition—hence the urgency of the question.

Trade unionism has found a fertile field among the hotel employees. None is more susceptible to persuasion than they; none is more easily yielding to utopian promises than they. No other class of laborers is so ignorant of economics. Very few are cognizant of the problems of life. Theirs is a happy-go-lucky existence. Most of them lead "a champagne life on a lager beer income," leaving little time to the study of their own existence. An astonishing ignorance of their own status in the labor market prevails amongst them. They are, moreover, so *clannish* that the lofty ideals of American democracy remain generally a foreign idea. No leader has yet arisen out of their midst to proclaim the liberty-giving value of education. The labor conditions in the hotel industry are at the same time so diametrically opposed to the conditions existing in other industries, of which the hotel employees are ignorant, that they fail to see the futility of applying trade union principles in their case. A cunning charmer has therefore an easy task, for the average mind fails to pierce the flimsy fabric of illusory promises. If education is not coming from within the ranks of the hotel employees, it must come from without, a fact which further emphasizes the urgency of the question.

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August Stender

The welfare of the hotel employees is intimately linked with the welfare of the bulk of the population. Every inhabitant has at one time or another received the service of hotel and restaurant employees, while a great number could not very well enjoy the comforts of life without them. Those "who eat to live" as well as those "who live to eat" are more or less dependent upon them, and as these two categories comprise all the people, it is evident that the welfare of the hotel employees is necessary to the material and social activities of the nation. This illustration of the importance of the hotel employees involuntarily touches a vital spot in their development. They are, so to speak, a product of the twentieth century. Their emancipation from serfdom is of recent date; it goes hand in hand with the rapid growth of the hotel industry. Recent years have seen the sprouting forth of gigantic hotels in all parts of the world. Like ocean greyhounds, they had to be manned to remain afloat; and to man them, recourse had to be had to all kinds of people. The demand for efficient hotel employees is still persistent. No provision had ever been made for training facilities. Employers and employees were taken unawares by the rapid perfection of traveling mediums; so much so, in fact, that the social development of the employees did not keep pace with them.

Roughly speaking, there are three distinct classes of hotel employees: clerical, skilled, and unskilled. The dividing line amongst them, however, is so faintly drawn that classification is practically impossible. Whether artisan, laborer, or servants is the issue. No matter how the issue may be decided, it is yet impossible to apply union principles, because of the wholly different remuneration of the hotel employees as compared with the wage of the laborer. The greatest obstacle to standardization of wages for hotel employees is the acceptance of gratuities (tips) from the guest. A damnable habit, it is true, but one that will never be abolished. It is therefore important that the hotel employees be acquainted with the definition of trade unionism. This can only be done by a detailed discussion of the question: Should hotel employees join trade unions?—hence its urgency.

Not only the actual conditions in the employment of hotel help, but also the experiences gathered from the strikes of recent years, add to the pertinency of the question. The hotel employees should guard against the repetition of the disastrous results of these strikes,—results which did more than anything else to bring home to the participants the absolute futility of unionistic efforts in their behalf. The Chicago strike, for instance, was a rank failure because the leaders were not of the hotel employees; they were ignorant of the grievances which might have been righted. Organization was inadequate, rash, immature. Pertinent grievances were lacking in most instances, if they did exist; they were superseded by an irrational demand

for exorbitant wages, in many instances an increase of 100%. So badly was the whole affair staged, so unreasonable were the demands, that other unions did not hesitate to withdraw their sympathy. The New York strike, moreover, was the selfish exploit of a few corrupt and irresponsible leaders. That it could at all assume the proportions which it did was due, on the one hand, to ignorance on the part of the employer of the maxim, "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or he will hold to the one and despise the other;" on the other hand, to lack of sympathy on the part of the employer with the trifling and easily righted grievances of his employees. To enlighten both upon the issue should be the paramount duty of the former; the urgent discussion of the question: "Should hotel employees join labor unions" will help to bring this about.

While organization of the workmen is conceded by a large number of fair-minded employers to be a natural and common right made increasingly necessary by the pressure of the industrial struggle; while there ought to exist a chance for a fair presentation of grievances, the history of labor unionism tends to demonstrate that its principles are not conducive to a beneficial solution of the grievances of the hotel employees. Trade unionism as represented by its forerunners, the mediaeval guilds, would indeed be an ideal state to strive for. Efficiency and honesty of individual effort were the bases upon which their standards were built. A strict and honest maintenance of the standards resulted in the attainment of a power which crushed feudalism, ruled all the operations of finance, and fixed a standard for work, for art, and for literature, that has made the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries famous for all time. These standards cannot, however, be attained through the methods practised by modern labor-unionism. While the trade unions array themselves against the employers, the guilds included both employers and laborers. They included every member of the craft from the wealthiest master craftsman or merchant down to the humblest apprentice. If the trade union of to-day is ever to return to the standards of the mediaeval guilds, it must abandon its policy of seeking to limit the freedom of contract through: first, coercion of employers; secondly, intimidation of non-union men; thirdly, interference with public comfort or necessity. Coercion expresses at most the impotent rage of brute force. It illustrates only the immature minds of the unscrupulous, lecherous, and pig-headed leaders; men who would never be trusted with a dollar in business life; men whose exaggerated opinion of their own importance permits them to abuse their power before they realize their responsibility. Coercion is absolutely fatal to the trade union cause. The intimidation of non-union workmen interferes seriously with the only too often proclaimed liberty granted by our democratic system

of government. Freedom to work is the laborer's might and right. Whoever interferes with it interferes with his time, which is all he has. Unable to create a job for himself, he must have a job furnished him; he should therefore work in fullest accord with the brain that creates and pays for his job. Interference with public comfort or necessity results in destroying whatever sympathy the public may have for the workmen. Especially true is this in the case of the hotel employees, because they are so intimately linked with the comfort of the people who will never extend their hearty sympathy and cooperation to any movement that attempts to accomplish by violence what can satisfactorily be accomplished only by education. Labor unionism, which advocates these destructive means, is therefore not beneficial to hotel employees.

Contrary to the high standards established by the old guilds through efficiency—the guild stamp upon any piece of work was a guarantee of perfect material and workmanship—labor unions discourage efficiency. As evidenced during the recent strike in New York, a large number of union men had never seen the inside of a hotel. A casual glance at the thousands of waiters parading the streets of New York during this troublous time revealed the astounding fact that the majority were recruited from all walks of life. This could only be possible because no efficiency test for membership had been established. Every newcomer was admitted to the union upon his own declaration without corroborating proof. While it is true that no trade schools have yet been established for hotel employees—a duty which should be assumed forthwith by the employer—it is also true that none of the trade unions maintains trade schools. These should be the main object of employees' organization. They would increase the efficiency of the individual a hundredfold. They are the most effective antidote to unionism. Efficiency will always revolt against the claim of the unions for equal pay for good and poor workers. Discouragement of efficiency is therefore another reason why labor unionism is not beneficial to hotel employees.

But not alone are labor unions injurious to the welfare of the members of a craft; they are also injurious to the public welfare, for they encourage lawlessness, as instanced by the violent behavior of strikers and labor leaders. Picketing, boycotts, breaking heads, even murder have been resorted to. Innocent bystanders and innocent guests have been menaced. There is no justifiable reason for violence except that the strikers have no other weapons. This is, however, only true of unskilled laborers; highly skilled laborers have other means of resistance. Therefore the many cases of violence during the last strike rather tend to classify the hotel employees justly. Unions, furthermore, arouse the enmity of labor for capital, even going so far as to disclaim a reasonable return on the actual investment in any well conducted and sagaciously

planned business. Because the laborer has not the ability to create a job for himself, he must have a job furnished him, which, under the present economic conditions, can be done only by capital. Instead, therefore, of fighting capital, labor should resort to arbitration and persuasion, and should not try to kill "the goose that lays the golden eggs," and thus jeopardize the public welfare. The advocating of illegal methods, as for instance "sabotage"—this newly coined word which has not yet been incorporated in most dictionaries and which really means wilful and malicious destruction of agents necessary in the production of the goods whose marketing the strikers try to prevent—as well as the discrimination against, and mistreatment of, non-union laborers, is another injury to public welfare, for it is an established fact that 70 per cent of the industrial workers and 90 per cent of all wage earners remain non-union. This proves that the enormous majority of wage earners neither unionize nor strike, but prefer to remain at work and settle their wage questions and working conditions for themselves directly with their employers. The great losses caused through strikes and boycotts by paralyzing the hotel business further emphasize the contention that labor unionism is not beneficent to hotel employees.

The aim of labor unions will be checked effectively by organizations of both hotel employees and employers, provided that the object of such organizations, in whole or in part, is to facilitate legitimate relations between them and to promote the general welfare, which requires that hotel employees should have decency and comfort because these are the never failing antidotes to unrest. Organizations with such objects in view will adjust the relations between hotel employers and employees. They will ensure for the employee: a minimum living wage; healthful conditions of labor; reasonable leisure; education that will mean greater efficiency; adjustment of difficulties without recourse to courts; provision for the emergencies of accident, sickness, old age, and other forms of dependency; while they will ensure for the employer: a reasonable return on the actual investment in his well-conducted hotel; immunity from ill-advised activity of organized labor detrimental to business and from violence; and speedy and inexpensive settlement of difficulties arising amongst them. The public will then be immune from the disastrous effects of recent strikes.

The attainment of these ends of social justice should become a part of the religion of every hotel proprietor and hotel employee. The existing hotel men's associations should face the issue squarely, "take the bull by the horns" as it were, while the existing conservative hotel employees' organization, the International Geneva Association, should do likewise. Both combined would forever eliminate the ever-threatening question: "Should hotel employees join labor unions?"

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